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National Freedom of Information Day

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Thank you, Peter. I'm flattered to be asked to come here to talk today. It is, of course, a special day. It's St. Patrick's Day. And it's . . . Gertrude's Day. And it is the day that Noah allegedly boarded the ark. I don't want to get into politics, but as I look over the landscape I sometimes wish old Noah had left the two Marines and the two Republicans out in the rain.

As I was pondering what I was going to say here today, I started to think about the words "freedom of information." Information should always be the one great, free commodity, and what a sad state of affairs it was that caused us to have to seek freedom for information. But what a descriptive phrase that is! For freedom of information clearly implies that the information we're seeking to free is being held hostage. And, indeed, that was the case when the law was ~~passed~~ in those days of Watergate -- and, sadly, it still is the case in this most free of nations: information still is being held hostage by the government.

To a person who is an American, an editor, and a lawyer, that is depressing indeed. But it is the fact. Before I move on to celebrate with you the wonders of the Freedom of Information Act, let me list for you the information that you cannot get from your government:

‡ Many coaches earn far more than the presidents of their universities. Some earn more than their state governors.

‡ Perquisites such as free cars and side deals such as lucrative contracts for endorsing specific brands of shoes make coaching at some schools as lucrative, in the words of one USA TODAY editor, as insider trading.

In all, 23 people worked approximately 10,000 hours to get the stories, stories that would have been impossible to get without the sunshine laws that now are in effect throughout the nation.

That's one end of the spectrum. Here's the other: A few months ago, I became fascinated -- make that outraged -- by the fact that the United States Information Agency had contracted with the School of Communications at Boston University to set up a project to teach Afghan rebels how to disseminate propaganda about the Soviet-Afghan war, propaganda that is aimed for Third World nations but that could well end up disguised as legitimate news in the information pipelines of the world. The U.S. was spending \$500,000 of our tax dollars for this ill-advised project. I wrote H. Joachim Maitre, the acting dean of the School of Communications at Boston University, to ask how much he was getting paid for running this program while he also handled his regular job. He wrote and said it was none of my business. So I asked my friend Alice Neff Lucan, esquire, a Gannett lawyer, to file an FOI request for me, and soon I had all the information about Dean Maitre and his high-priced band of story makers.

I'm still mad, but now I'm knowledgeable as well.

The Freedom of Information Act "is the single most effective tool for holding Government agencies accountable to the people," Joan Claybrook, the former head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, testified in 1984.

Indeed, "the processes of government touch almost every aspect of our lives, every day," Senator Edward Kennedy said in 1974 during debate over amendments to the Freedom of Information Act. He went on: "From the food we eat to the cars we drive to the air we breathe, Federal agencies constantly monitor and regulate and control. Our government is the biggest buyer and the biggest spender in the world. It taxes and subsidizes and enforces. And it generates tons of paperwork, as it goes about its business. The Freedom of Information Act guarantees citizen access to Government information and provides the key for unlocking the doors to a vast storeroom of information."

Not all politicians share that view. On Oct. 17, 1974, President Ford vetoed the amendments. He called the bill "unconstitutional and unworkable." Congress overrode the veto, though, and the past 18 years have proven him very wrong.

The Reagan Administration people seem close to the Ford view. Under the guise of their campaign against drug abuse, they pressed for limits on the FOI Act last year, succeeding in getting the act watered down after six years of trench warfare by newspaper groups and their lawyers. There were certain ironies in the Reagan group's position.